

Frequently Asked Questions About Historic Preservation

Utah State Historic Preservation Office
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Where can I find out about the history of my building?

The State Historic Preservation Office maintains files on hundreds of historic buildings throughout the state. Local historic preservation commissions also keep files on buildings in the community. If your building has not been researched, the Preservation Office has instructions that lead you through the process.

Doesn't listing my building on a historical register restrict what I can do to it?

In general, no. There is a common misconception that historical designation will keep you from making changes to your historic building. Restrictions are imposed only if (1) the building is listed on a local register (as opposed to the National Register), and (2) your city has a strict preservation ordinance. Most cities in Utah do not impose restrictions on historic building owners. Those that do usually limit their control to the exterior. Listing on the National Register of Historic Places imposes no restrictions whatsoever. Its purpose is to provide recognition and to encourage preservation. Restrictions on historic buildings can be imposed only by local governments, not by the state or federal governments.

Are there grants or other funds to help me restore my historic building?

Financial assistance is currently limited to low interest loans and state and federal income tax credits. Matching grants from the State Historic Preservation Office have been awarded in the past to National Register-listed buildings, but they are not currently available due to lack of funds. Small-dollar grants may be available through your local historic preservation commission as part of the Certified Local Government program.

For information about low interest loans (primarily for residential buildings) contact the Utah Heritage Foundation at 533-0858.

Information on federal income tax credits (for income-producing buildings) and state income tax credits (for residential buildings) is available from the State Historic Preservation Office at 533-3500. You can save 20 percent of the cost of your rehabilitation work through either program.

Must buildings be kept in pristine original condition in order to remain "historic?"

The most visible "character defining" features of a building should be preserved, but other elements--such as electrical systems, plumbing, kitchens, and bathrooms--must often be changed to accommodate new uses or improved standards of living. Even these changes can be done sympathetically so they complement the original character of the building.

What are some of the common Do's and Don'ts when it comes to rehabilitating a building?

Roofs:

- Though wood shingles are the most common historic roofing material, less expensive asphalt shingles are an acceptable replacement. If you choose to invest in wood shingles, use the more historically accurate, thinner sawn shingles rather than the heavy, split shake shingles.

- Avoid concrete or clay tile, aluminum shingles, and other metal roofing materials that are not compatible with the architectural style or age of your building.
- Avoid adding dormer windows to the front of your house; they are much less intrusive on the rear roof slope and even on the sides.

Exterior Walls:

- Never sandblast to clean or remove paint from brick walls; use appropriate chemical cleaners and low pressure (400 psi maximum) wash instead. Sandblasting and high pressure washes permanently damage the protective outer layer of the brick. Always clean small test patches first in order to determine the gentlest effective method.
- Repoint deteriorated mortar joints with a softer, high-lime content mortar rather than modern mortar which is made up mostly of portland cement. Modern mortar is stronger than the old brick, so as the building expands and contracts through the seasons the brick will be the first to crack. A basic historic mortar mix contains one part lime to three parts sand. Contact our office for more details on a mortar mix appropriate for your building.
- Avoid aluminum or vinyl siding, even on soffit and eaves. They often obscure architectural details, can trap moisture inside the wall, and are not as maintenance-free as their manufacturers would lead us to believe (dents and scratches can't be fixed, paint colors fade over time, etc.).
- Exterior woodwork can be protected from the elements with a good paint job. This includes proper preparation of the surface and the right kind of paint (oil base paints hold up better than acrylic).

Windows:

- Avoid enlarging window openings or closing them off.
- Whenever possible, repair rather than replace historic window frames. Old frames can be made weather-tight and can often be adapted to accommodate double pane glass. If windows must be replaced, select windows that match the original as closely as possible. A list of window manufacturers and contractors who repair windows is available from the State Historic Preservation Office.
- Storm windows on the interior rather than the exterior are less visible and often cheaper.
- Avoid using tinted or mirror-finish glass in windows; they are inappropriate on historic buildings.

Additions:

- Keep new additions to the rear where they are less visible and make them narrower and shorter than the original building. If an addition on the side cannot be avoided, set it back as far as possible so the shape of the original house is still discernable. Try to match the original roof pitch, window shapes, eave width, etc.
- Avoid attaching garages to historic houses whenever possible. A free-standing garage or one attached with an inconspicuous connector or breezeway is preferred.

Kitchens and Bathrooms:

- These rooms often need to be upgraded with new fixtures, etc., but this can be done so they complement the original house rather detract from it.

What contractors know how to do the work correctly?

The State Historic Preservation Office has started compiling a list of contractors with experience working on older buildings. Preservation Office staff are also willing to advise contractors and homeowners on appropriate techniques and materials, drawing from our experience and extensive collection of articles and product information in our preservation library.

Contact Cory Jensen (533-3559) or Nelson Knight (533-3562) at the State Historic Preservation Office for information on appropriate rehabilitation techniques, products, and contractors.